Opening Statement of the Honorable John Shimkus
Subcommittee on Environment and the Economy
Hearing on "Cyanotoxins in Drinking Water"
November 19, 2014

(As Prepared for Delivery)

Today, the subcommittee will be taking a look at the harmful algal blooms in drinking water, including the source water used for drinking. I thank Representative Latta for his efforts on this issue and for bringing it to the subcommittee's attention. He has delved into the minutia of this issue in search of useful and long-term solutions to this problem.

Having sat in some of the meetings Mr. Latta has been having on this issue, I realize what a complex and widespread issue this is, but one which only gained national attention a few months ago.

Some folks may be tempted to think there are easy solutions to this problem, but I caution jumping to simple or sweeping conclusions. There is no single "smoking gun" that leads to algae-based toxins in drinking water, I believe we will hear our witnesses say there are still plenty of things we don't know about this subject.

I understand from drinking water treatment professionals that the many types of cyanobacteria and diversity of their habitats make it complicated to predict the precise conditions favoring their growth. Physical factors that affect whether cyanobacteria grow include available light, weather conditions, water flow, temperature, and mixing within the water column. Acidity and nutrient concentrations – including those from municipal waste water, urban lawn and golf course management, and agricultural processes – all contribute to algal bloom growth.

In addition, we'll hear testimony that experiencing a blue-green algae bloom does not always mean there is a problem.

We need to know more about this issue. We understand that at least 35 states have reported blue-green algae blooms, but we need to separate out the drinking water concerns from those in the recreational waters context. This hearing is meant to focus on the Safe Drinking Water Act, not laws in other subcommittees or committees whether that be regulation of nitrogen deposition under the Clean Air Act or nutrient management under the Clean Water Act.

There are plenty of questions within the context of ensuring the provision of safe drinking water that we should focus on and learn about today.

Our hearing will allow us to focus on where we are with our understanding of U.S. EPA's efforts on better grasping blue-green algae in the drinking water context, including health effects and occurrence data, monitoring and testing techniques, and public health communications strategies. We will also hear from witnesses on what happened this past August in Ohio, and what lessons were learned. Finally, we will get a better sense of what drinking water treatment professionals are doing to better prepare to handle these events.

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